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Brexit and the Law of Unintended Consequences

Lawrence Freedman

There is no clear prospectus for a United Kingdom outside the European Union, or for an EU without the UK. 'Brexit' is presented as a great escape from a remote bureaucracy impervious to democratic accountability. Once liberated from Brussels, according to the Leave campaign, the nation will be able to achieve, through its energy and resourcefulness, great things that are currently beyond its grasp. What those great things might be is not specified. The Leave campaign is not a political party with a leadership and a manifesto, waiting to form an alternative government should its campaign succeed. It is a loose coalition of individuals from across the political spectrum, including free traders and protectionists, interventionists and isolationists. It is unsurprising that it has no agreed position on optimum future trading arrangements, or on how the country should engage with the rest of the world.

Much of the Leave campaign focuses instead on the dangers of staying put. The EU is described as interfering, borderline corrupt and practically incompetent, incapable of coping with stresses in the eurozone and the influx of refugees from conflicts in the Middle East. It warns, on the one hand, that the EU is determined to become a super-state, taking responsibility for security away from the UK and disrupting current defence and intelligence arrangements, especially those with the United States. It predicts, on the other, that the EU is about to be engulfed by crises with which it cannot cope. The UK is urged to get out before it is too late.

Against these arguments, the Remainers struggle. It is difficult, for the moment, to offer an uplifting vision of the future within the EU. They have little choice but to acknowledge the EU's imperfections and suggest possibilities of reform. They note that the UK is more insulated than most from the current crises because it is not part of the eurozone and is not a member of the Schengen Agreement, so it has more control over its borders than other EU members. If Europe's crises become truly overwhelming then it will make no difference whether Britain is in or out. The constitutional independence Leavers yearn for is not the same as the actual ability to control events.

The Remainers are handicapped by the evidence of an institution that has overreached, and is now struggling as a consequence. The EU's benefits in terms of free movement and trade, and the ease of relationships among Europe's great and small powers, are taken for granted by a generation that has not known how bad

things can get when national rivalries shape all aspects of policy. These benefits are now at risk for the UK if it leaves, but for the EU as a whole if it is unable to cope. There is, however, more excitement in stepping out into the unknown than in sticking to the hard grind of institutional reform and working to mitigate the worst effects of the current crises, and those that might follow.

Going it alone?

It was weariness with managing decline, marked by the end of empire and stuttering economic performance, that led a reluctant UK towards Europe in the first place. The origins of the UK's belated but persistent applications to join what was then the Common Market lay in the view that the country was stuck in a post-colonial rut and being left behind by the continental economies. This decline was marked by the humiliation of Suez, the inability to put down a rebellion by a white-settler regime in Rhodesia, and the withdrawal from a military presence 'East of Suez' because it could no longer be afforded. A turn to Europe was a way to boost the economy while compensating for lost power.

Britain's status before joining the European Economic Community in 1973 can therefore provide no guidance or encouragement for post-Brexit foreign policy. The idea that before the UK signed up to the Treaty of Rome it was exercising great and independent power with confidence and effectiveness is nonsense. Leaving now would send a signal of withdrawal, of a country, once at the heart of every great international debate, now content to fall back on its favourable geographical position, strong culture and economic health, protected by the Channel and a nuclear deterrent. The UK would bother far less than before with the problems of the rest of the world. It is this prospect that has prompted the leaders of Britain's allies and partners to line up to say how unwelcome Brexit would be.

A post-Brexit desire to prove this prediction wrong might lead to even greater exertions on defence to show that UN and NATO responsibilities were still taken seriously. A lot would depend, however, on the impact on domestic politics and the economy, especially in the short term. Faced with a sterling crisis and uncertainty over trade, it is equally possible that the response would be retrenchment. Brexit has been cited as a trigger by the Scottish National Party for another push for Scottish independence. The Trident replacement programme could be threatened.

Moreover, the UK is a country with a foreign policy geared to multilateralism. It long ago gave up on the idea that it was strong enough to look after itself. After 1945 it held on to the alliance with the United States as closely as it could. With the US, it worked to found and take leading positions in a surge of new international institutions, including the UN and NATO. Joining the Common Market continued that pattern of relying more on close cooperation than rivalry to achieve British goals. Of course, in the European case the fit was more awkward. This was not an

institution the UK had founded. The rules were already in place and the priorities set, and not always in ways that suited the UK. Yet the record on Britain's growth and international standing since the early 1970s strongly suggests that joining the EU did not hold the UK back, and helped it to recover lost ground.

Even facing a uniquely national crisis, such as the Argentine seizure of the Falkland Islands in 1982, European solidarity was of great assistance. Sanctions were imposed on Argentina, and France prevented it from getting more Super Étendard aircraft and Exocet missiles. Another potential source of trouble that has been managed because of the EU is the dispute with Spain over the status of Gibraltar. The governments of both the Falklands and Gibraltar have expressed anxiety about the impact of Brexit on their security.

One consequence of this long history of multilateralism is that the UK could struggle to cope with the demands of life outside the EU. The government machine, lacking the requisite technical expertise and bureaucratic capacity, would be severely stretched as the country sought to extricate itself from laws, regulations and obligations accrued over four decades, and replicate as much as possible the trading advantages currently enjoyed by virtue of EU membership. The Leavers assume that the rest of the EU would behave in a rational and rather grown-up fashion to facilitate the transition. They make few allowances for vengeance, irritation, the narrow national interests of individual members, a general desire to avoid setting precedents for others tempted to leave and the sheer intractability of some of the issues.

Insecure

The post-Brexit issues under the narrow heading of 'security' may be more manageable than others in that the EU's role is currently limited. In the area of counter-terrorism, Leavers point to the ability of Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL) militants to creep into the EU under cover of refugee flows, and how eventual Turkish accession might make this worse. But Turkish accession is many years away and the opt-out from Schengen still allows the UK to control its borders. The government argues the advantages of such measures as the European Arrest Warrant. Leave says this barely helps, and that EU demands for intelligence sharing could even threaten the 'Five Eyes' agreement with the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In this respect, the argument is about whether staying in would undermine existing arrangements.

Here there is a tendency to set up a contest between the EU and NATO as alternative and incompatible security providers. This is a remnant of an old, unresolved debate about the implications of the EU's attempt to develop a Common Foreign and Security Policy. This aspiration was held by those who wanted to create a European super-state, with its own armed forces. It was also promoted by those who simply

resented the United States' role in European affairs. For this same reason, however, this aspiration was always treated warily by those who could see no sense in duplication of effort and trying to cope without the military muscle and deterrence provided by alliance with the United States. After the end of the Cold War, the EU tried to show that it could now sort out the big issues of European security, but it foundered when trying to cope with the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, and soon was relying once again on the US and NATO. The aspiration has even less support now than before as a result of the EU's expansion into central and eastern Europe.

The challenge now is not that the EU might try to push away the US but that the US might move away on its own accord. This risk is evident in the rhetoric of the current US presidential campaign, in President Barack Obama's laments about 'free riders', and in demands that have been building up for some time for Europeans to become much more self-sufficient in defence. Having seen president Bill Clinton's clear reluctance to intervene in the Balkans, prime minister Tony Blair agreed with French president Jacques Chirac to launch a new initiative at St Malo, in December 1998, to boost Europe's security capabilities.

The effort lost steam with the disagreements over the 2003 Iraq War. By then it was already getting bogged down in the old debate about whether the EU should seek to supplant NATO as the premier security provider in Europe. There were ludicrous and protracted negotiations about how the two institutions should interact. The EU no longer pretends to have NATO's credibility in the field of hard security. Now and again, the idea of a pan-European army surfaces, but there are no mechanisms to oblige Britain to commit to such an enterprise, and no good reason why it should. A degree of modest cooperation on undemanding military tasks makes sense, if only as a hedge against American withdrawal. The possibility of a President Donald Trump serves as a reminder that the Atlantic relationship may be subject to as much future turbulence as the European. Even assuming future presidents continue to stick with NATO, Americans will continue to expect Europeans to do more to sort out their lesser regional problems.

While the EU can never be more than a pale imitation of NATO on defence matters, it makes other major contributions to European security. This is more than a matter of bringing former enemies into the same institution, and integrating so many former communist states into the West; it also means using other elements of power, especially economic, in pursuit of shared foreign-policy objectives. The two most recent examples of this have been sustaining economic pressure on Iran while offering it a negotiated route out of the dispute over its nuclear programme (which Iran eventually accepted); and pressuring Russia over its campaign against Ukraine, while also offering a way out through the Minsk process (which is yet to be taken up by Moscow).

Without the UK, this sort of international role would be much more difficult for the EU – and that is assuming that the union holds. The most serious risk of Brexit is that it would lead to a more general unravelling. Instead of traditional rivalries being contained and expressed through the everyday workings of the EU, the UK's departure would show a way forward for other countries also frustrated by the constraints of membership. In some of the Leave rhetoric there has been a suggestion that it would be all to the good if the UK inspired a sort of popular insurrection, with one state after another demanding liberation from Brussels. There are many reasons why the European order is under strain, and could be entering a more chaotic and dangerous phase. Brexit would add to the possibility of a contagious fragmentation.

Extracting the United Kingdom from the European Union is not going to make either body stronger or better able to cope with the current set of security challenges, whether from Russia or ISIS. It could leave both in a much weaker position. With so little clarity on what Brexit is intended to achieve, it is hard to think of a greater test of the law of unintended consequences.